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Personality section

Patrolman Hugh McKenna of the Essex County Park Commission says, "There are things a man can do for boys if he cares enough and tries hard enough to reach them. All a fellow needs is direction. The rest you can leave to the boy." He has sought out the hard core of goodness in every boy and has seldom been disappointed.

Assigned to West Side Park on 17th Avenue eight years ago, McKenna soon learned that he was not patrolling a Sunday-school picnic. Scores of boys from Newark's most congested areas, descended on the park every afternoon. They were a rough, tough crew who traveled in gangs intent on vandalism, gang-fights and general rowdyism. Gang membership gave a sense of bravado and collective strength that no one boy could generate by himself. Sports for sport's sake did not interest them. Football was an opportunity to tear each other apart, and inflict some cracked heads. A baseball bat was just for walloping. The kids were at war with everything and everyone, but mostly they were at war with themselves. They hated cops with the special resentment they had for any type of discipline.

McKenna's work was cut out for him, "Somehow I had to approach the boys, not as they huddled about in gangs cooking up new mischief, but as I could isolate them and get to know the individual boy." It was not an easy task. There was a wall between him and the boys that had to be scaled, and no one boy was going to jump over that wall to lose face with his fellows. The answer was to break down the wall. McKenna leveled it by pounding away day after day with a battering ram of confidence and understanding. He did not attempt to meet the boys

half way to talk to one boy, to get to know one boy, to win the trust of one boy at a time.

McKenna found that boys of ten to fourteen need adult guidance, and they welcomed it. It is a friendly cop who was not out to "pull them in," who was not looking for "squealers," but who was interested in preventing trouble before it started. The kids were tough, plenty tough, but not nearly so hard as their surface defiance made them appear. From lack of direction they were thrusting out on all sides at once. They traveled in gangs because they were afraid to walk alone. They wanted to destroy because they had never learned to protect. They felt responsible to no one, because they believed that no one cared.

McKenna undertook to convince each boy of his personal significance. He might not be a very big guy in the gang, or in school, or at home, but he was a mighty important person in the eyes of the God who created him. The idea of God and of accountability for wrong-doing to anyone beyond local police power was entirely new to many of the boys, and a long-forgotten precept to others. McKenna used the persuasion of religion to awaken the boys to their responsibility to themselves and to others.

He did not line them up in the front rows of their respective churches on Sunday mornings, nor hold Bible sessions in the park. He talked to them straight from the shoulder in the kind of talk they understood. They were not feeling God when they broke a street light or smashed a window or stole a bicycle. It was not just a big joke on the cops, it was a tremendous joke on them. They were feeling themselves by a false sense of superiority in getting away with something, because no one ever really gets away with anything.

In day by day encounters, McKenna came to know every boy West Side Park, and as strange faces appeared with each new Spring,

he became acquainted with the new crowd, too. He had won the confidence of the boys and valued it highly. The boys would not betray that trust and McKenna would not fail the boys. They told him when trouble was brewing and he could forestall it; they told him when a boy was planning a petty theft and helped set the fellow straight. The older boys developed a sense of responsibility toward the younger ones.

About three years ago McKenna started the West Side Better Citizens Club. It is not a formal organization with officers and a meeting place. There are no dues and no regulations. It has one objective--the development of boys into better citizens. There are 950 club members, each one known personally by McKenna and invited to join on the assurance that he would live up to the pledge which each member signs: "I promise to do my duty to God by attending Church every week and by knowing and keeping the ten commandments of God. I also promise to do my patriotic duty to my country by obeying all the laws laid down by the authority. By keeping this pledge I hope to become closer to God and a good citizen of our country."

McKenna's boys are rough and tough with the hardness that life demands of a boy today. They still travel in gangs because every boy must belong to something, and a gang gives prestige and social status in the neighborhood or in school. But there's a new look about many of the gangs in the West Side neighborhoods today. This improved behavior is the result of McKenna's influence and their own determination to be better citizens. They are not breaking lamps or destroying property; they are not engaged in gang-fights; they no longer defy the police but working with them in a new realization that they have a role to play in making this world a better place and a safer place to live in. And they have adult leadership in Officer McKenna who has given them the direction they wanted so much.

Adult leadership is the crying need of the many gangs in Newark, and according to McKenna, much is being done and much can be done by other policemen, firemen, and public-spirited citizens who will work with boys. He believes that the Newark Youth Council is the appropriate vehicle for coordinating and directing such activity. McKenna is very active in the Youth Council in which the Board of Education and the many group work agencies in Newark participate in focusing the role of young people in community affairs. With increased adult leadership in the Council its sphere of influence can spread beyond the clubs and organizations that already have direction to the groups who have no responsible adult guidance and are approaching delinquency if they are not already juvenile delinquents.

McKenna is a mild soft-spoken Irishman with traces of County Monaghan, his birthplace 40 years ago, still lingering in his brogue. He lives at 41 Grand Avenue, Newark, with his wife and three daughters and one son, who, McKenna says, "will never join a gang."

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